

## Pink Starburst

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## Pink Starburst

by [isntitlovely \(isntitcrazy\)](#)

### Summary

It made too much sense. The earnestness in Dream's voice when he gushed about the little girl's happiness, when he told George that giving away free toys was more fun than just putting them back in the machine. When he played pretend with kids at the counter, even if only for a minute, and their parents would look at him like he'd just made their day. Maybe he had; at least once, he has to have made some little kid's day.

Briefly, George thinks about being a kid again; so unwaveringly in love with all the little things. As he gets older, he wonders what he'll fall in love with this time, as it all seems to come with a lot more to worry about.

The five times George knew his coworker was good with kids, and the day he finally realized he's in love with him.

### Notes

today i offer tooth-rotting fluff. also i am kind of projecting maybe just a little. writing this fic was fun because i got to use a lot of personal experience (which makes things easy) and also dream is just so endearing and i really missed writing him so like <3 yeah

gifted to rowan aka resident kidfic enthusiast (even if this isn't really a kidfic)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

When George gets a job at a hotel's arcade, he doesn't have any expectations.

Thankfully, his job turns out to be easy. He gets paid minimum wage to sit behind a counter and hand out prizes to people who paid too much money to lose at games—the only “real” work he has to do is occasionally stocking machines, but even that's easy. The hardest part of the whole thing is probably remembering what keys unlock which games.

But that'll get easier as time goes on. At least, that's what the guy who trained him said.

George has been working for almost a week at this point. Five shifts down, god only knows how many he has left to go—but George isn't thinking about when he's leaving this job, it's far too early for that. He just comes to work with nothing but his phone and a bottle of water he'll surely forget about, ready to pretend he knows exactly what he's doing (even when he doesn't).

And all his coworkers so far have been nice. He's worked with three different people: his manager, the overly excited guy who trained him called Karl, and some other guy named Sapnap. They'd all been almost startlingly nice, so George had high hopes for all the people he hadn't met. He wondered how one place had managed to collect such a nice group of people, but he'd never complain.

Today, he was meant to be working with someone he hadn't met yet. Today, George walked into the arcade to find an unfamiliar face behind the counter, gate already unlocked and pulled back where he was dumping Hershey Kisses into a plastic bin. He knew the boy's name was Dream—he'd seen it on the schedule—but he was still taken aback by the sheer knowledge that he *didn't know this boy*.

So George paused for a moment, standing near the gap between the counter and the wall, simply staring for a moment while Dream threw his now empty bag away. He didn't say anything, *neither* of them did, standing away from each other without acknowledgement. George wondered if he'd even been noticed yet.

Dream looked over at him when he finally registered George's presence, a bright yet warm smile on his face. It was an excited wave and the flash of his ivory teeth that finally drew George in, sliding in behind the counter with a reach to put his things down by the cash register.

“Hey,” the blond said through his smile, putting the now-filled bin of candy down under the counter where it belonged. “You must be George, right?”

George nodded. Somehow, he'd forgotten that learning names off schedules was a mutual ability, and he was nearly startled by the way Dream knew his.

“Yeah,” he answered instead, running a nervous hand through his hair. “Dream?”

Dream grinned wider, and George found that his smile was sickeningly contagious. The blond even gestured at himself proudly, endearing arrogance spread thick across his face.

“That's me!”

George laughed, slipping past Dream to look out at the arcade floor. He couldn't see much aside from claw machines that looked to have been stocked already, and the arcade was relatively empty—it wasn't even nine in the morning, and hotel or not, how many people were going to show up at an arcade that early?—there was only one family, somewhere in the back corner where George could barely see them.

He only knew they were there because he could see them when he glanced at the camera feed, but he didn't have to pay much attention to them until they came up to the counter. He wondered if they'd even do that, or if they were people who'd want to save their points.

And he was lost in his own head when Dream pressed up against the counter beside him, tapping fingers against the glass as he looked out at all the same things George was looking at.

"I already stocked all the machines," he said simply, the words grabbing George's attention enough to turn his head. "And I filled any of the candy that needed to be filled, so, there's kind of nothing to do right now."

With a nervous laugh, Dream rubbed at the back of his neck. George could see the tint of pink on his cheeks, rose colors halfway hidden beneath his freckle-smattered skin. And George smiled up at him—he hadn't quite realized just how tall the guy was until right then—hoping the glimmer in his eyes could be passed off as light reflection.

"Okay," he answered simply, shrugging his shoulders with feigned nonchalance. "So there's not anything I need to do?"

"Not at the moment, no," Dream admitted, another nervous laugh spilling past his lips. "I think I'm supposed to make you do more because you're new, so you can stock all the machines later."

George smiled, looking out at all the machines in question. He actually kind of *liked* stocking machines—he didn't know what it was, but there was something about the process that he enjoyed. He could've shared that information with Dream, told him that it was something he liked to do and asked if Dream felt the same, but he decided that he seemed like a fun person to tease.

So he teased him instead.

"Wow, making me do all the work?" George scoffed with the carry of sarcasm. "And I thought you would be *nice* to me."

Dream sputtered momentarily, stepping away from the counter as George swallowed a laugh.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, raising up both his hands in mock surrender. "That's what the manager told me to do!"

George laughed out loud this time, not bothering to stifle it the way he usually did. Even if he'd only known him for five minutes, there was just *something* about Dream that made George want to be unapologetic. So he didn't apologize, not even in the silence of his own head.

"I'm only kidding, Dream," he reassured, and Dream pouted with a mirthful look in his eyes.

"Okay," he huffed. "Fine."

George grinned to himself, turning back out to face the floor. And he leaned over the counter, propped up on his elbows. There *were* stools behind the counter to sit on, George was just choosing to ignore them. And Dream wasn't sitting either, he was walking around George to stand on the opposite side of him.

A distant and repeated tagline from one of the games filled George's ears. He muttered it back to himself under his breath, only driven halfway to crazy in what was still practically his first week here. (He remembered his manager making a joke about hearing the claw machine music in his sleep. George was inclined to believe that).

"What school do you go to?" Dream asked suddenly, and the return of his voice startled George's back straight.

"Oh, uh," he stumbled, and he wondered how he was managing to have trouble with such a direct question, "the one down the street." He made a gesture like he was waving down the road, though he wasn't sure who it was supposed to be helping. "I don't live too far, I walked to work."

"Really?" Dream raised his eyebrows. "Do you not have a license?"

"No," George shrugged, "I haven't even taken all the classes yet. I just don't care enough."

He laughed quietly, and Dream laughed, too. On a scale from one to ten, George would rank Dream's laugh an eleven.

"Oh," Dream said, sounding almost sheepish. "Well, I drive. And I live, like, two towns over."

He also gestured vaguely with one hand, and George was comforted by the fact that he found it endearing.

"What grade are you in?" George asked, continuing with the flow of *small talk*.

He'd never been the biggest fan of silly questions like this, but he supposed that no one really was. It just felt like obligation, and while he *was* curious to know the simpler things about Dream, he preferred to know all the stupid things.

Like what his coworkers did for fun or that embarrassing story about tripping over someone's feet on the sidewalk, or the way he'd learned Karl's very in-depth rating of every single flavor of Monster in the stores. But he asked the practiced questions anyway, because the information he got from them felt important enough to know.

"I'm a senior next year," Dream answered, shifting the bins on display to make them annoyingly straight.

"Same here," George said, stepping away from the counter to get out of Dream's way. "Is this your first job?"

"Yeah," and he crouched down to get to the stuff on the bottom shelf, "but I worked here last summer, too. So," he looked up at George for a moment, shrugging his shoulders, "eh."

"I bussed tables last summer," George said, even if Dream never asked. "Sucks, don't do it."

And Dream huffed out a laugh, pausing with his hand full of candy bars. "Noted."

They fell into a silence, with Dream hastily organizing bins of candy that didn't really need to be organized and George pretending not to watch him. He'd leaned against the cabinets behind him, hands pressed between the wood and his back while he stared down at where Dream was crouched on the floor.

Distant arcade noises filled his ears like they belonged there. George wondered why they didn't play music to swallow all the obnoxious taglines.

When Dream stood up and dusted off his hands (that weren't even dirty), another family walked in. Seeing how Dream was already closer to them, he smiled with a welcome readiness that told them to look in his direction. So as the parents approached the counter, George didn't worry himself with answers on his tongue.

"Where do I get one of the cards?" the woman asked, holding up two fingers in an L shape with her question.

"I can do it right here!" Dream answered with an audible smile, something George knew was all over his face even if his back was turned.

He wondered how Dream managed to be so excited at nine in the morning. How he managed to be so excited about arcade game cards.

"Oh, George," and the sound of his name made him jump out of his skin, "do you know how to do the cards?"

Dream was pointing at the cash register with an expectant look on his face. George swallowed as he attempted to regain composure, pushing up off the cabinets behind him with a quick nod.

"Yeah."

Taking a step away from the cash register, Dream made space for him. "Then you should do it."

"Oh, uh," George laughed, "yeah."

He looked at the woman standing by the counter, currently rifling through her purse, presumably looking for her wallet. George wasn't sure if he was supposed to say something or not, so he just stood there like an *idiot* and hoped that Dream wasn't paying attention to him.

*Why did he even care so much about Dream looking at him?* He was just his coworker, and he knew that George was still relatively new. A thousand different voices in George's head said there was nothing to be worried about, but he was still tapping his fingers against the counter with a nervous edge to his movement.

"Can I put twenty dollars on one card?" the woman asked, startling George out of his strange trance.

Smiling with as much politeness as he could muster, George extended a hand to take the money from the woman's hands. "Sure thing!"

He tapped all the right buttons on their touch-screen monitor, swiping the card to actually put the money on it. And he handed the game card to the woman at the same time the cash register opened, muttering a "*thank you*" under his breath while he slipped the twenty dollar bill into the right spot.

Closing the cash register, he watched the woman disappear off into the arcade. And he turned his attention back to Dream, who, in the time that George was dealing with a single game card, had been approached by a family looking to redeem prizes.

It was the family that George had seen in the far back corner of the arcade earlier. It was two parents and their young son, who just by looking at him, George assumed to be around five or six. But he wasn't very good at guessing people's ages at first glance, so he took his own assumption with a grain of salt.

Dream held the scanner gun in one hand and a card in the other, a quiet *beep* sounding when he scanned it. George sat down on the stool behind the cash register and hoped Dream wouldn't ask to trade places with him.

"You have 527 tickets," Dream read off the screen, sliding the boy's card across the glass countertop.

The boy grinned excitedly, and George was endeared by the way his parents smiled down at him like he was their entire world. In a way, he supposed he was, but it's not like he could understand that properly when he was still just a teenager. Dream seemed to be watching the family, too, but he was smiling back at the boy while his excited eyes scanned the prize counter.

Of course, George knew what it was like to be a kid on the other side of this counter; plagued by indecision, choice paralysis striking him still when he couldn't decide what toy to get. It was almost easier when he didn't have very many tickets, just enough to blow it all on candy and not call it a waste.

"I want that!" the boy called excitedly, pointing up at something that George couldn't track at this angle.

But Dream could. And he looked over his shoulder at the toy bow and arrow hanging off the wall, raising one of his fingers up to point at it as well.

"This?" he clarified, and the boy nodded through his toothy smile.

But his mother crouched down behind him, two comforting hands on his shoulders and a sorry smile on her face.

"I'm sorry, buddy, but you don't have enough for that." She pointed up at the bow and arrow as well, which Dream had paused in front of. "See? That's 543, you only have 527."

"No, it's fine," Dream said quickly, pulling the toy down off the wall despite the gap between the two numbers. "It's close enough, if he wants it he can have it."

And he placed the bow and arrow down on the counter as the mother stood back up, smiling at Dream with hesitance. George hopped up to deal with compensating the points on the screen, leaving Dream to talk to the parents while his back was turned.

"Really?" the mother prodded, and Dream laughed through a smile. "You're sure?"

"Yeah, of course," Dream answered with ease, like he'd done this a thousand times before.

George figured that maybe he had. And he added sixteen points to the boy's card, turning back around to nod at Dream in a silent acknowledgement. He watched the little boy take his new bow and arrow off the counter, smiling down at it like it was the best thing in the world, even if it was nothing more than a cheap toy from the arcade.

"Thank you," the father said with a nod towards Dream, one that was returned as he leaned down to grab his son's hand.

"No problem," the blond answered, handing his scanner gun to George so he could properly finish the transaction. "Have a nice day!"

The family left the arcade as George was scanning the blank card taped to the counter, effectively clearing the screen back to blank. And he looked at Dream as he was slipping the scanner gun back

into his holder, hoping to god that his smile didn't make him look like an idiot.

"Made the kid happy," Dream said with a shrug, slipping past George to go sit on one of the stools.

And George could only nod, turning his body to follow Dream's movements. He was now rifling through the drawer beneath the cash register in search of the keys, tossing them towards George with the expectation that he could catch—and he couldn't, but he did that time—leaving the brunet to look at him expectantly.

"Could you check the back room for more of those same bows and arrows?" Dream asked, grabbing his water bottle off the desk. "They're pretty popular."

George nodded, slipping away from the counter with the weight of the keys in his palms. He wondered why he was so caught up in the way Dream had done something so small, something he'd seen his other coworkers do with the same practiced ease. And he hadn't gotten caught up on the way Karl added points to people's cards for an extra piece of candy, but as George was unlocking the back room, Dream's smile was the only thing on his mind.

Was he allowed to be his favorite coworker already?

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Things continue to go smoothly at work. George would be inclined to say that he likes his job.

When he tells his friends that, they look at him like he's insane. He's getting paid minimum wage to stock toys and deal with assholes, why would he like his job? But George *does* enjoy all the seemingly tedious things, and he likes his coworkers enough that he thinks he'd have fun even if it was all terribly boring.

And he did still have a favorite coworker. As much as George enjoyed the presence of *all* his coworkers, there was still something about Dream that made George like him just that much more. He wasn't even sure exactly what it was that made him feel that way, if it was just his aura or his attitude or what, but he was always a little bit more excited when he saw their names together on the schedule.

Today was a day that George was working with Dream. As always, the blond got their first and unlocked the gate, stocking machines while he waited for George to come in. He was still stocking when George got there, so he used his time to fill half-empty bins of candy in the counter.

It was when he was lining up chocolate bars that Dream came back behind the counter. George stood up on his toes to give Dream more room to pass by him—he wasn't sure how much that actually helped, but he did it anyway—and Dream discarded the too-full keyring into the drawer beneath the cash register.

He nodded in George's direction in lieu of a greeting, who only nodded back. There were far too many candy bars spread out across the counter in George's own form or "organization," and he could tell that Dream was looking at him funny. He tried not to pay it any mind.

"These are all, like," George laughed, waving a chocolate bar in Dream's direction, "half-melted."

Sidling up next to him, Dream took one of the Hershey bars out of the box. And he held with two hands like he was about to do something, looking between the candy and George with some kind of mischief in his eyes.

"Well," he started, turning the chocolate bar over in his hands, "it is pretty hot in here."

Despite the fact that Dream didn't say anything funny, George laughed. And he was pushing stupid Baby Ruths to the back of the box—he had only ever seen one person get a Baby Ruth the whole time he had worked there, which is why they had so many—to make room for all the candy bars that people actually liked.

He reached for the Hershey bar in Dream's hands, but the blond reeled backward and held it just out of his reach. With a grin on his face and lilt in his eyes, Dream tried to bend the softened candy just to see if it would work.

His face morphed into something akin to shock, like it hadn't been the expected result.

"Dream!" George scolded, and he finally managed to take it away from him. "We're still meant to give this out."

Inspecting the candy like Dream had somehow ruined it beyond repair, George tried to bend it flat again. He wondered if it was really doing anything, he wondered if Dream's playful morphing had even really done anything. The chocolate was still malleable, so hypothetically he could just twist it back into place, right?

"But now it's damaged," Dream offered, the grin on his face reading with everything intentional. "And I think there's a tear in the wrapper," he pointed at the corner, "see?"

George narrowed his eyes, holding the chocolate up closer to his face to look at it properly. As expected, he did not see any tears in the wrapper; and even if there was one, how much did it matter?

"No, there's not," he laughed, looking back up at Dream and the stupid smile on his face. He took the candy out of George's hands again. "Hey!"

With a laugh, Dream tore the edge of the wrapper. He held it out in George's direction, waving it in the air like the defect had been there all along and George hadn't just *watched Dream tear it*. He frowned at the blond, crossing his arms over his chest with played-up defiance and disappointment.

"It's torn," Dream said again, pointing at the actual tear in the wrapper. "See?"

George laughed despite his displeased act, shaking his head with the pivot of his body. He turned back towards the counter, picking up all the stray candy bars from the counter to put them away like he was *supposed* to be doing.

"You're such an idiot," George huffed, but he was still entranced by the melodic sound of Dream's responding laugh.

"I'll share it with you."

There was no way to pretend like that wasn't endearing. George tried to bite the smile off his lips, hoping that the downward angle of his face would hide the amusement. He finished stocking candy bars in silence, sliding them back into place under the counter as Dream disappeared off to the back room.

When George sat down on the stool by the cash register, he found that damn Hershey bar sitting on the counter, just out of sight. He picked it up to look at it like it was anything but ordinary, only putting it down when he heard the rustle of keys that notified him of Dream's presence.

He helped stock the few missing toys on the back wall. And they read the time off to each other every ten minutes like that would somehow make the shift go by faster, though George couldn't

complain when it was a shift spent with Dream.

He was getting paid to talk to someone he liked talking to, what was there to lose? Their day had been relatively slow since George had gotten there, no real events since Dream had essentially stolen a chocolate bar and promised to share it with George; which they still hadn't done, but George had decided already that he wasn't going to be the one who brought it up again.

It was nearing the end of their shift when a family of four came up to the counter, and Dream asked if George could take both the kids himself. He was still kind of new to the job—new enough to not have the keys to the gate, and he was still the newest employee there—so Dream was still doing that thing where he made George do all the work.

Well, not *all* the work. Just most of it. And George had learned that it was hard to say *no* to Dream, partially because he asked every question so sweetly and partially because he just liked him too much. But it was also true that Dream did most of the really boring stuff, so George was alright with taking a scanner gun in each hand to help the presumed siblings on the other side of the counter.

“You have 646 points,” he said, pointing to the son, “and you have 958.”

Both kids earned a fond shake from their parents at how many points they had, and George knew that these were his favorite kinds of parents. The ones who didn't complain about how hot the arcade was or how they had places to be, the ones who didn't act inconvenienced when their kids couldn't decide what they wanted.

They just radiated pride for their children, even if their accomplishment was nothing more than winning a few arcade games. And the boy held a shark hand puppet from one of the claw machines that made George smile wider, the animal pulled down over his hand while the mouth opened absently.

Neither of the kids could've been older than ten. And George thought the daughter looked older.

“Can I have one of those?” the girl asked, pointing at the sparkly bouncy balls in the basket in front of her.

“Yeah,” George smiled at her, crouching down behind the counter to scan the barcode on the back of the basket. “What color?”

He placed a hand in the basket, shifting the bouncy balls around without intent. The look on the girl's face said concentration, and George wondered how a decision could be so difficult when there were only three colors to choose from.

“Blue, please,” she answered finally, and George took one of them out of the basket as he stood up.

Handing the bouncy ball to the girl, George shifted the weight of both scanner guns in his hands. And she had turned to her parents to show them the new toy like it was the most exciting in the world, asking her just-as-excited father to hold onto it for her so it didn't roll away.

When George turned his attention to her brother, he found that he was talking to Dream. He couldn't help but watch them interact for a moment, especially while he wasn't actively helping either of the kids claim prizes. They both seemed decently distracted, and George was apt to let himself get distracted, too.

“Yeah?” Dream was prompting, leaning over the counter where George had started listening in the middle of a conversation. “Are sharks your favorite animal?”

Dream reached out over the corner of the glass, poking the shark puppet on the boy's hand with one finger. And the kid smiled through his answering nod, going to bite Dream's finger with the puppet, who immediately reeled his hand back with a feigned yelp of pain.

"Ow!" Dream complained, shaking his hand like it was actually hurt. "You've gotta be careful with that, buddy, those teeth are sharp!"

The boy giggled, moving to nip at Dream's forearm with the shark. Dream jumped away from the counter with another complaint of false pain, but George could see just how much fun he was having through the look in his eyes.

"Hey," Dream offered, "what's your shark's favorite candy?"

As the boy thought up an answer to that question, George took a moment to look back at the parents and their other kid. They seemed to be just as enamored in watching Dream as he was, though the girl was playing with her new bouncy ball.

George wondered if parents liked seeing other people be good with their kids. He figured that if he was a parent, he would.

"Oh, you know what," Dream said before the boy ever found an answer, crouching down behind the counter to grab something. "I bet it's Swedish Fish. Does your shark like fish?"

With a cheek-splitting grin, the boy nodded excitedly. He covered the distance Dream had created between them so they stood right in front of each other again, and Dream was standing up straight with a bag of Swedish Fish dangling from his fingers.

He leaned over the counter with the candy suspended in the air, staring down at the boy's awe-filled eyes and the puppet still on his arm. George couldn't help but smile as wide as the kid was, and he wondered if Dream was just *naturally* like this or if it was an acquired skill.

"He's gotta open his mouth," Dream prompted, and the boy—or the shark—was quick to oblige.

Dream dropped the bag of candy into the shark's mouth (or the boy's hand) with one of those cute, excited gasps that people only do around children. It made George laugh as the boy giggled, dashing over to his parents with all the excitement placed in every step.

It was so, *so* pathetically endearing. Both the way the parents crouched down to their son's level to talk to him, the way he whispered because he was shy but still excited, the way Dream was wandering closer to George to take the right scanner gun out of his hand.

And they finished helping those kids with split effort; George finished with the girl and Dream with the boy. George was almost sad that he couldn't just sit there and watch Dream interact with the kids, and he wondered why he was so enthralled in the way he acted around children.

Because it was obviously different than how he acted around George, different than how he acted around any adults who came into the arcade. But watching Dream act all excited with children and grin from ear to ear made George smile, too, so when the family was leaving and Dream said goodbye to the shark as well, George felt like the world was glowing.

(They shared that half-melted chocolate bar outside Dream's car at the end of their shift. George loved his job).

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It was a decently busy day at work, and George was once again on a shift with Dream. And though

the arcade was busy, the redemption counter was not, so the blond was busying himself with a fidget spinner while George pretended to care about a box of playing cards being neat and in order.

So with the quiet whirl of a fidget spinner at his side and the loud sound of arcade games to his front, George dumped what had to be at least thirty decks of cards onto the counter. He only stared at them for a moment, blinking when he tried to focus himself on the task he'd given himself, wondering just how desperate he was to waste time.

The constant hum of Dream's fidget spinner drew closer. When George turned his head, the blond was standing right next to him, balancing the toy on one thumb.

"What are you doing?" he asked, pointing at the cards that had been spread all across the counter.

Looking down at the decks in question, George reached out to take one. And he dragged the plastic bin they belonged in closer, started trying to line the bottom with as many decks of cards as he could fit without making it look stupid.

"They were kind of a disaster," George admitted with a quiet laugh, comforted by the light and constant sound of a fidget spinner by his ear. "I mean, I'm the one who put them in here in the first place, so I'm just making them straight."

He started on a second layer of cards. In his head, George set a silent reminder to fill the empty space at the side of the bin with upright decks, but he hadn't quite gotten there yet.

"Oh," Dream said quietly, setting his fidget spinner down on the counter.

So they returned to silence again—or, as much silence as one could get in a half-crowded arcade. George shoved all the cards he'd left on the counter into the bin they'd come from, determined to make them all fit in a neater fashion than he'd found them in.

They were a relatively new arrival, something he'd just stocked during his shift yesterday morning. And he wasn't quite sure what had come over him when he dumped them all into the bin in the messiest way possible, because he was just changing it now, but he figured it was at least something to do with his time.

Some days, that's all these shifts felt like. Looking for a way to waste time until it was time to leave. And George still liked his job, because getting paid to do nothing was probably better than breaking his back, and he *did* enjoy the few things he did have to do.

He finished organizing the cards, finding that everything fit, but only just barely. It was something of a tight squeeze, but the only thing George could do about that was hope that someone claimed a deck of cards soon.

"Oh, hey," Dream said suddenly, and George glanced up at him as he was sliding the box of cards into its place. "There's a credit on that machine."

Following the trajectory of Dream's outstretched finger, he found that he was pointing to one of their play to win claw machines at the front. Sure enough, there was a single credit on it, making itself known with obnoxious music and a flashing red *1* on the control panel.

"There is," George echoed, immediately cringing at himself for sounding like such an idiot.

But it wouldn't have been in Dream's nature to act like George had done something stupid. He only dropped his hand back against the glass countertop with a quiet sound, turning to face George with curiosity spread all across his features.

“Do you want to play it?” he questioned, and George bit his lip.

For a moment, he looked between Dream and the machine in question. On one hand, it was something to do, but on the other hand, did he really want to? He’d played that machine once before, when he was working with Karl, and he found that he wasn’t very good at it.

“No, you can go,” George answered finally, shrugging his shoulders with a laugh. “I suck at those games anyways.”

Dream laughed, too, and George knew that he wasn’t laughing *at* him. Even if he was, George could admit to himself that he still would’ve found the sound of it to be endearing.

“You know it’s play to win,” Dream teased, “right?”

With the roll of his eyes, George tried to do away with the grin on his face. Unsurprisingly, it didn’t work, and the quirk of enjoyment spread across his lips persisted.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t make me suck any less,” he insisted. “Just go play the game, idiot.”

With another musical laugh, Dream patted George on the shoulder as he slipped past his back. And George watched as Dream approached the machine, putting his hands right on the joystick and the obnoxiously red button to, presumably, *play to win*. The music that emitted from that game in particular had always been obnoxious, and it was the one that George’s manager had teased about hearing in his sleep.

George heard it in his sleep. Or, at the very least, as he was *falling* asleep. He could still remember the sound of it from when he’d been laying in bed the previous night, eyes searching for the ceiling in the dark while claw machine tunes haunted the insides of his ears.

He still liked his job, just not that part of it.

However, he *did* enjoy watching Dream attempt to win something out of the stupid game. Even if it was a confirmed toy at the end of it, the whole thing still felt slightly rigged, just as all claw machines did. Or maybe Dream was just as bad at those kinds of games as George was, constantly aiming the claw in the wrong spot and missing everything by a touch.

It was vaguely frustrating to deal with, but at the very least, when it was play to win, George knew that he was for sure going to win something. Even if he was only going to unlock the machine and put it back at the end of it all, the point was to get rid of the credits. And that’s all Dream was doing as well—getting rid of the credit that someone had left behind.

George picked up the fidget spinner while he was just standing there, spinning it mindlessly in his watch. Dream had finally picked up a prize, winning himself a plush panda bear as the phrase “*You’re a winner!*” rang out from the machine in front of him. Falling into a crouch to be at the right level, Dream pulled the toy out from behind the little toy, tossing it between his hands with a smile that George could see despite the distance between them.

But Dream didn’t come back to get the keys, didn’t unlock the machine to put the toy back as George had done that one time. Instead, he took that silly little panda bear and wandered around the arcade with it, only to end up right back where he started at the game he’d won it from in the first place.

There was a little girl standing there with her father. George—with all that age-guessing talent of his—thought she looked to be six years old. And she was pointing excitedly at the toys in the machine with the hand not encased in her father’s, a bright smile on her face as she rose up on her

toes to see better.

“Daddy, look!” she said excitedly, bouncing on the balls of her feet with a grin. “Aren’t those pandas so cute?”

The father leaned down a bit, looking through the glass at the pandas his daughter was pointing at. George flicked the fidget spinner in his hand mindlessly, attention caught by the interaction unfolding across the arcade floor.

“They are very cute, sweetheart,” he agreed, slowly straightening his back to stand properly again.

And George assumed the girl was about to ask if she could win one of them, but Dream was sliding up next to them ready with an interruption. He held the panda he’d won earlier in front of him, smiling down at the girl where she stood by his feet.

“You like the pandas?” Dream asked, ensnaring her attention enough that she turned to face Dream.

“Yeah!” she agreed excitedly, pointing at the toy in Dream’s hands. “Like that one!”

She laughed, and Dream laughed too. He squatted down to the little girl’s level, holding the panda bear out to her in a silent invitation. Letting go of her father’s hand, she reached out towards the stuffed animal with a look of wonder on her face.

“Can I hold it?” she asked quietly, to which Dream nodded with more politeness than agreement.

“Of course you can.”

The girl took the panda in her hands, staring down at it with the same look of awe she’d had in her eyes since she first walked into the arcade. Dropping his hands down to his sides, Dream looked at her with the warmest smile on his face.

George felt the fidget spinner stop spinning between his fingers. He didn’t restart it again, far too distracted by the tug of his own lips and just the way Dream looked at kids when he could lock eyes with them.

“And you can keep it,” Dream told her, “if you want.”

Almost in spite of the distance between them, George could see the look on the little girl’s face when she brought her face back up toward Dream. Her entire face lit up, from her eyes to her lips to the freckles on her cheeks, and George felt himself huffing out a laugh when he didn’t know what else to do with his joy.

“Can I really?” she asked, looking up at her father as if seeking confirmation.

He looked happy, too. Smiling down at Dream where he was still crouched on the ground, one hand on his daughter’s shoulder to keep her close.

“Are you sure?” he asked cautiously, to which Dream laughed again.

“Yeah,” he shrugged. “I was looking for someone to give it to anyway. And I think you,” he pointed at the girl with gleeful intent, “will make a very nice home for that little panda bear.”

Even if George didn’t think it was possible, the girl’s face lit up brighter. Bright enough to put the sun to shame, to put the entire arcade of flying colors to shame. Objectively, she was the brightest

thing in the room, but when it came to George's utterly subjective opinion, Dream outshone them all.

"I'll take really good care of him, sir!" the girl exclaimed, hugging the panda close to her chest. "I promise!"

Dream laughed, nodding like he knew she was telling the truth.

"Make sure to give him lots of hugs, okay?" he grinned with all his teeth, leaning in closer when his voice fell to quiet. "He's very cuddly."

"I will!" the girl promised immediately, and Dream stood up slowly.

He waved at the girl as he started backing away towards the counter, which made George realize he should probably be doing something other than staring. Out of a lack of anything productive to do, George only spun the fidget spinner he was still holding, pretending to tear his focus away from Dream to pay attention to that simplicity, instead.

It didn't really work, but maybe it would look less like he was staring.

"Well, thank you very much," the father said in earnest, his daughter a little too distracted by the toy in her hands to say the same thing.

"No problem," and Dream waved at him too, "have a nice day!"

"You too," the father returned, and he crouched down next to his daughter just as Dream had been doing before.

With a hop in his step, Dream looped around the counter to slide up next to George again. He leaned over the counter, propped up on his forearms, staring out at the arcade floor just as George had been doing before—only this time, there wasn't really much to be looking at.

George would know, because he was looking, too. Pretending to be interested in the flashing colors of overpriced games or the occasional yell from a kid. He looked over at Dream when he couldn't keep up the act anymore, finding that bright pink smile still cut into his freckle-covered cheeks.

"I honestly thought you were just going to put the thing back in the machine," George admitted, words spinning out into a laugh by the end of his sentence.

Returning the eye contact, Dream's viridian eyes sparkled under the fluorescent lights. It was the first time George had looked at Dream's eyes properly since they'd met, and he figured that he could probably get lost in them forever.

"I mean, I could," shrugging, Dream stood up straight again. "But giving those toys to kids is *way* more fun. See?" He pointed across the floor at the little girl, who was still standing there with the panda in her arms. "Look at how happy she is!"

And she *did* look happy. Undoubtedly so. She'd looked happy since she walked into the arcade at all—it was something George hadn't failed to notice, because he didn't have anything else better to do than pay too much attention to the people who walked in through the door.

But the way she'd looked at Dream, it was like he'd handed her the world. Even from the distance George was standing at that was true, so he could only imagine just how much her eyes had sparkled to Dream when he was standing so close.

It made too much sense. The earnestness in Dream's voice when he gushed about the little girl's happiness, when he told George that giving away free toys was more fun than just putting them back in the machine. When he played pretend with kids at the counter, even if only for a minute, and their parents would look at him like he'd just made their day. Maybe he had; at least once, he *has* to have made some little kid's day.

Briefly, George thinks about being a kid again; so unwaveringly in love with all the little things. As he gets older, he wonders what he'll fall in love with this time, as it all seems to come with a lot more to worry about.

He tries not to think about it. He finds little things to love instead: like the way that girl's eyes lit up when Dream gave her that panda bear, or the grin on Dream's face as he still watches her gush over it to her dad.

George wonders what he's thinking.

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It persists.

George is constantly looking at Dream, and he's constantly trying to read his mind. It's not like Dream is particularly hard to read; he's a relatively open book. And he's loud and honest about himself and bad at keeping secrets, so George feels like he knows a little bit too much about him seeing how they're supposed to just be coworkers.

But that doesn't mean that George never asks silent questions. When Dream is busying himself with anything that isn't talking to George, he's trying to guess what he's thinking—can he see it in his eyes? On his lips? In the way he moves his arms?—and it's becoming something of a tired game.

Perhaps George is just bad at reading people. He tries not to think about it, he really does, but even he knows that's a worthless attempt—he is always going to be thinking about it. So long as Dream is in his line of sight, George will be thinking about him. Attempting to guess what goes through his head in the sense of one hundred different things—it almost feels like he can't help it.

*What does he think about George? How does he always manage to be so ready to help? What does he think about people? How is he so put-together?*

Maybe what George has fallen in love with is hypotheticals and guessing games, and maybe he wishes he could've fallen in love with something simple instead. Because his mind feels as messy as their unkempt back room when he gets to work that morning, Dream behind the register spinning in a swiveled stool while he stares up at the ceiling.

George wonders how long he's been there. By the looks of it, it has to have been a little while, and George is already trying to read his surroundings and put pieces together. Like the fact that the machines are all stocked, and all the bins of candy look full, and Dream had gotten to a far enough state of boredom to be spinning in his stool rather than standing up behind the counter.

It's not like George can blame him. He just puts his things down by the cash register in silence, sitting on the other stool—the one that doesn't spin—and wondering if he should be the person who speaks first.

He doesn't, fishing that overused fidget spinner out of the drawer sitting next to him. He spins it with that now-familiar sound, stares at the turning metallic color until he feels Dream's eyes on him. And when he looks up, he notices that he's stopped spinning; he wants to make a joke about

how only one thing can spin at a time, but he's worried that it won't make sense.

"Machines are stocked," Dream informed him, to which George only nodded with a quiet hum. "I hope nothing crazy happens today."

George furrowed his eyebrows. He hadn't worked in a few days—and he spent his off days doing nothing but thinking, which is probably bad for his health—but he knew that Dream had. Their schedules lined up so that they worked with each other more than anyone else, but they both still had a shift with Karl every now and then.

"Yeah?" George questioned, flicking at the fidget spinner to get it going again. "Did something crazy happen yesterday?"

The laugh that comes tumbling from Dream's lips says that something did happen, the hand pushing through his hair only emphasizing that fact. George spins the fidget spinner before it can even come close to a stop, propelling its constant motion with a single outstretched finger.

"Yeah," he sighed. "Like, four games broke. I felt bad that I had to keep calling service, but what else was I supposed to do?"

George pursed his lips, attempting to get the fidget spinner to go faster. He even pulled his eyes away from Dream to look back down at the toy in his hands, a blur of a circle held between his fingers. Green eyes had once again found the ceiling above their heads, the minute twist of his swivel chair returning.

"That doesn't sound fun," George remarked, flicking at the spinner again. "But they're fixed now?"

"Yup," Dream answered immediately. "Walked the floor this morning and everything looks to be in order, so we're good."

Swinging his legs slightly, Dream got up on his feet. And he didn't do anything with his newfound mobility but rake his fingers through the bin of Jolly Ranchers, effectively mixing them up for no good reason. George watched him just because he could, letting the spinner between his fingers slow with lax speed.

"Wow," he laughed, "you got a lot done before I got here."

Dream laughed, too, amused and giddy and full of life. He pulled his hand away from the candy he probably wasn't meant to be touching, turning to face George as he cocked his head to the side. It made his hair fall in a strangely attractive way, the emerald of his eyes glimmering enticingly.

"I worked quickly this morning," he explained, the shrug of his shoulders coming strangely where he was leaning against the counter. "Faster than usual, at least."

They both laughed, and George flicked at his spinner again. He could feel the way their conversation was coming to a natural end, and he would've done anything to keep it going. But he didn't know what to say except laughter, didn't know what to do except flick at a fidget spinner until he got tired of watching the world turn.

So he didn't say or do anything, just kept Dream in the corner of his vision where he still seemed to be looking in his direction. George acted like he didn't feel watched, but it was difficult to ignore the piercing viridian gaze from only a few feet away from him.

"If you could go anywhere in the world right now," Dream started, and it brought George's eyes

back up to his face, “where would it be?”

Pursing his lips, George set the fidget spinner down on the counter beside him. And by the time he’d folded his hands in his lap, Dream had already picked up the spinner, occupying his fidgety hands with the toy while he kept his eyes locked on George.

“Um, oh god,” George laughed, “that’s a hard question, Dream.”

And the blond seemed to think about it for a moment, getting mindless with the way he flicked his spinner. His eyes lost George’s for a moment, trailing away to the back wall and it’s cover of prizes, hip leaning against the edge of the counter with the tap of his foot.

George waited for him to say something. And he kept the lopsided grin on his face, a stark comparison to the knitted concentration that had found its way to Dream’s face.

“I guess you’re right,” Dream said thoughtfully.

Glancing down at the fidget spinner in his hands, Dream attempted to balance it on one finger. It wasn’t doing a very good job at staying upright, listing to the sides and nearly clattering onto the floor, but Dream would push it straight every time.

“There’s a lot of places in the world,” George proposed, leaning forward to rest crossed arms on his knees. “And *anywhere* is quite a broad offer.”

Dream huffed out a laugh, the sound spilling mostly through his nose where his lips remained half-shut. He dropped the fidget spinner into the palm of his opposite hand, catching it with a vague yet satisfying sound.

“Well, I think I’d go to the city with my grandparents.”

Green eyes returned to alabaster skin with the answer, ivory tearing through pink in a bright grin. George raised an eyebrow slightly as in a silent encouragement for Dream to continue, and he wondered if the blond could read his face well enough to see that.

“I don’t really go into the city much for anything besides doctor’s appointments,” he explained, turning slightly to lean his back against the counter. “And I went with my grandparents when I was like, seven or something, and I remember having a lot of fun.”

“Really?” George piped up, sitting straighter in his seat. “What’d you do?”

The laugh on Dream’s lips carried a nervous edge, and the way he ran his hand through his hair seemed to match that energy. But he turned his eyes back to George with a similarly lazy smile to the one on the brunet’s own lips, shrugging his shoulders with a nonchalance that didn’t quite match the rest of him.

“I don’t remember,” he admitted, half-sheepish. “I just remember having fun, nothing specific, really. I just think it would be fun to do that again, and I love my grandparents a lot.”

*“I just remember having fun.”* Something about the idea of it all made George smile without end, the idea of remembering feelings instead of moments even after all that time. Wanting to replicate something out of a want to recreate the feeling rather than the memory, which is perhaps the only part of it that can be replicated.

George will not come to work tomorrow with Dream and have this same moment all over again under a slightly shifted sun. But he *will* come to work tomorrow and feel the same type of warm

joy that he always feels, and he can count on that more than he can count on himself.

“That’s nice,” is what he ended up saying instead of all that, because it felt less messy and more like words that coworkers were meant to share. “I think I thought of an answer, but it’s a lot less...” he hesitated over the right adjective, “*meaningful* than yours.”

Dream laughed like he thought George was wrong, but he looked at him with a curiosity in his eyes that could’ve intimidated George on anybody. Arguably, it was more intimidating on Dream.

“Let’s hear it.”

With a sigh and the downward tilt of his head, George gave the only answer he could think of. “Alton Towers.”

There was confusion not only in Dream’s following question, but in the very way he stood across from George. “Alton Towers?”

“It’s a theme park in the UK,” George informed him, picking his eyes up off the floor and letting his bangs hang down in his eyes. “I’ve never been, but I’d really like to go.”

Quizzically, Dream pointed a single finger in the brunet’s direction. “Aren’t you from England?”

“Yeah,” George laughed, “but that doesn’t mean I’ve been to Alton Towers.”

Dream shrugged, pushing himself up and off the counter. With his front facing George once again, he tapped a hand on the glass of the countertop with a sense of finality, an unnecessarily large grin on his face for what they were talking about then.

“It’s still a good answer,” Dream reassured him, pulling another laugh through George’s usually tight-sealed lips.

“Well, it was an interesting question.”

And they continued on like that. Took turns asking useless questions and giving useless answers, learning new things about each other that didn’t really matter. But it wasted all the excess time they had spilling through the gaps in their fingers, and people came and went from the arcade, but they always seemed to have something better to be doing.

George wondered if anyone was *ever* going to come and redeem prizes. He felt like he hadn’t touched any of the scanner guns all night, and he probably hadn’t. Not that he was going to complain about having nothing to do—Dream *had* made a request for nothing crazy to happen on their shift—but he was starting to run out of useless yet insightful questions. He wondered if Dream had enough to last them to the end of the shift.

But maybe they didn’t need Dream’s cache of thought-provoking queries, because there was an exceptionally frightened-looking child approaching the counter. Dream being Dream, he immediately jumped out of his seat, leaning over the counter to get closer to the kid where they were standing.

“What’s wrong?” he asked in the most sincere voice George had heard on him, one that somehow managed to pull on his heartstrings despite being so objectively sweet.

The kid looked up at Dream with the widest eyes, and even George could see the tears welling up in them from where he was sitting. He got up off his stool, too, deciding to stand right next to Dream with a kind look on his face.

“I-I can’t...” the kid paused when she sniffled, “I can’t find my mommy.”

The way the little girl’s voice cracked over the words made George’s heart turn into a puddle, and he could feel his face breaking under the implication in those words. Just like he knew all the giddy parts of being a kid, he knew all these moments, too.

He knew getting lost in grocery stores and asking for help from people who looked too tall and too professional, he knew feeling small in a place that felt so *big* when every single hallway looked the same as the last. But despite all the ways he could feel with the kid standing in front of him, he still didn’t know what to say.

George knew that if he had been standing behind the counter all alone, he would’ve been screwed. Luckily, he wasn’t standing behind the counter all alone, and Dream (being Dream) always knew exactly what to say.

“You can’t find your mommy?” he asked in that same sweet, saccharine voice, and the kid made an “uh-uh” sound in confirmation. “Can you walk around the counter for me?”

The little girl nodded, walking around the counter until she was behind everything with the two of them. And Dream had already fallen to crouch at her level before she could even get over to them, which only clued George into following suit with a few seconds delay.

“We’re gonna help you find your mommy, okay?” Dream promised, giving the little girl a smile while she wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “Can you tell me her name?”

The girl seemed to think for a moment, stuttering over the lump in her throat. George hated it, George *hated* this, he hated watching little kids cry—he hadn’t had to see it much outside bratty tantrums when a kid didn’t win a game, never like this. All he knew was that he felt terrible and he wanted this to end, and that he didn’t know what to do or say or how to help.

“Mommy’s name is...” the girl still seemed to be thinking, and George knew the only word in her head was *mommy*, “Jennifer.”

“Jennifer?” Dream clarified, earning a nod from the girl in return. “Okay, and what’s your name?”

“Ally.”

“Okay, Ally, can you tell me what your mommy looks like?”

The question seemed simple to George; simple and objective. But to a little kid who was already stressed enough, George could only imagine how difficult words had to be. And the girl broke down sobbing, burying her face in her hands with choked sounds that wracked her whole body.

George looked at Dream like he would know what to do. Dream managed to be seven steps ahead of him.

“We’ll help you find her, okay?” he reassured, leaning closer to Ally with a hesitant hand hovering over her shoulder. “I know she’s looking for you, too, it’s okay,” he whispered, finally giving and outstretching both his arms. “Can I give you a hug?”

The girl nodded, everything but running into Dream’s now open arms. And Dream pulled her in close to his chest, letting her cry all over his shirt with tiny little fists balled up in the fabric. With a hand stroking over her back gently, Dream whispered quiet reassurances into the little girl’s ear.

“Shh, it’s okay,” he soothed, and George could see the way her body relaxed. “We’ll find her,

Ally.”

It was just that for a moment. Dream had started rocking the two of them back and forth slightly, quiet reassurances never faltering where they were whispered into Ally’s ear.

“M-Mommy has...” the girl paused over a snuffle, pulling her face out of Dream’s now tear-stained chest. “She has dark hair, and she’s in blue.”

“Blue?” Dream questioned, and the little girl nodded sadly. “Okay, dark hair, blue, Jennifer.”

Dream turned his head quickly, looking at George with his arms still around the girl. “George, can you do me a favor?”

Without hesitation, George nodded. “Yeah.”

“Can you go look for her mom?” Dream asked, and George nodded again immediately, already rising to his feet. “And maybe tell the front desk or the office or something, I don’t know,” he huffed out a laugh, and it was more nervous than anything. “You’re more rational than I am.”

George did not feel more rational than Dream. Dream was the one crouched on the floor with the crying child in his arms, Dream was the one who knew what to say and how to say it. He was the one giving George instruction for god’s sake, he wouldn’t have been able to put much of anything together on his own.

“Yeah, I can do that,” he answered with another confirming nod, slipping past Dream where he was still on the floor.

“We’ll stay here,” Dream said to the girl, but he was raising a hand to point at George. “See, that nice man is gonna go find your mommy, and he’ll bring her back to find you, okay? But we’ll stay right here.”

Ally looked up at him with those same wide eyes, pointing down at the floor in a questioning motion. “Right here?”

“Right here,” Dream repeated. “Do you want a piece of candy while we wait?”

It was with the girl’s responding nod that George turned back around, walking quickly on his feet to exit the arcade. He wandered down the halls of the hotel with three things in his head: dark hair, blue, Jennifer. He wondered if that would be enough to find the woman he needed, but he figured the added panic of a child being missing would make the person he was looking for more obvious.

There was no concept of time as George looked; it could’ve been five seconds or a whole hour since he’d left the arcade, but he was assuming it had been more like a few minutes. But he found a very frantic-looking woman rushing down the room-lined corridors, a crazed look in her eyes as she seemed to be looking everywhere.

Sure enough, she had dark hair and a blue dress on. She wasn’t saying much of anything aside from quiet mumbles to no one but herself, but George rushed up to her before she could get too far away from him.

“Excuse me,” he said first, catching the woman’s attention. “Are you Jennifer?”

Even just with that, George could see a sense of relief wash through her eyes. And she nodded with a long exhale, running a hand through the dark hair that had helped to identify her in the first place.

“Yes,” she answered, “have you seen my daughter?”

With the kindest smile that George could muster, he prompted, “Ally?”

And the tension in that poor mother’s shoulders seemed to dissipate instantly. “Oh, thank god.”

George laughed, but nothing was very funny. He knew it was the mix of nerves and quick-washing relief, the slow of the pounding in his heart that made it hammer against his chest the way it was.

“She’s in the arcade,” he prompted, making a vague gesture that was meant to usher the woman along.

She followed him. And they walked alongside each other back to the arcade, not saying anything to each other because they didn’t need to. George, once again, didn’t even know what to say, and the aura of relief strewn about the mother was enough to keep him going all the way back to the counter where he’d come from.

Dream was still crouched on the floor by the little girl, who now had a lollipop in her mouth. Her eyes were red and stained by tears, but she was laughing, and Dream was giving her a smile that made George feel like he was at home.

The mother gave her thanks to Dream a thousand times over now that her daughter was back at her hip, and Dream could’ve stood there all day telling her it was no big deal. But even George knew it was more of a big deal than Dream was making it out to be, and even George knew that he was never going to admit to that.

Because he was something like too humble for his own good. And when George asked how he managed to be so good with kids, Dream only shrugged and said “*I’m not, really.*”

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Another day, another shift with Dream. George would never have it in him to complain.

As always, he got to work after Dream. He’d since been given keys to unlock the gate, but he rarely had to use them—not that he minded, unlocking and locking the gate was terribly annoying and he didn’t *want* to do it. He also didn’t enjoy hanging around the arcade by himself, so he preferred being the second one to work.

When he showed up that day, Dream had boxes out on the counter and was restocking the back wall. After George had set his things down on the counter, he immediately moved to help Dream, handing him plastic dart sets and bows and arrows from boxes to hang up on the wall.

“I guess the last shift yesterday was lazy,” Dream said, and though it came out in a lilted tone, George could tell there was some honesty in there. “There was, like, *nothing* on the wall when I showed up.”

“*Nothing?*” George teased in emphasis, handing Dream another set of mermaid dolls to put on the hook. “I think you’re exaggerating, Dream.”

With an eye roll that George nearly missed, Dream groaned indignantly. But even through all his displeasure, the grin on his face was still prominent enough to be noticeable.

“Maybe,” he relented, hooking the last doll set from the box. “But it was seriously, like, sad.”

Laughter spilled out past George’s grinning lips. “I believe you.”

They broke down the boxes together, leaving them in a pile at the end of the counter to be dealt with later. And they returned to their well-practiced routine of sitting on stools and finding something pointless to talk about, which had become a strange version of a game in all the time they'd spent together.

Or maybe it wasn't a game. George certainly felt like it was, but maybe it was because he felt like he shouldn't be having *this* much fun just talking to a coworker.

But they'd take turns asking questions or telling stories or trying to make the other person laugh, stealing fidget spinners out of each other's hands when they only had one and finding ping pong balls under the cabinets to throw at each other. Even if George had wound up with a bruise on his leg last week after Dream had hit him too hard, it was still too much fun to be something he was getting paid for.

(And Dream had been totally relentless about how easily George bruised, which somehow made it better).

George would ask a question about something trivial like Dream's favorite book or movie or show, only to be followed by Dream and his "*do you think our names dictate the people we become?*"

*That* question turned into a whole thing, with George arguing that since Dream had *chosen* the name he now goes by, that his consideration of the question had to be different. That because his name only came after he already knew himself whereas George's was from when he was an infant, and different rules applied to the way they adhered to the titles.

Dream argued that it wasn't meant to be as deep as George was making it. George argued that it was a deep question.

Maybe they looked like total idiots, having overly passionate arguments about things that didn't matter behind the arcade counter at ten in the morning. Arguments that carried over to the background of helping customers who were just there to claim prizes, giving them the experience of George shouting "*you're such an idiot!*" over his shoulder while he set a slinky down in front of a kid.

But it was so sickly *them*. And George wouldn't have changed it for the world. Because it made him love coming to work, it made him love a job that he had expected to be boring or confusing or difficult to get used to. It made him like waking up in the morning because he had something and someone to go to, it gave him a smile to miss when he wasn't around and the well-craved feeling of a summer that he didn't waste.

He wondered how Dream felt. It was already something well-known to himself that he was terrible at reading the other boy's face.

And it had been a relatively uneventful shift since George had arrived and helped Dream stock the back wall over lighthearted bitterness, though George knew that something *had* to happen. He hadn't worked a single shift with Dream that didn't end with a story, and that was saying something—he'd worked a lot of shifts with Dream.

When George was stocking one of the claw machines, a kid who was running around the arcade ran head-first into the open door. He hit his head and fell onto the floor with a cry, and George felt like an *idiot* standing there with a hand over his mouth like his shock would somehow help him.

But Dream was Dream. And even if he was sitting behind the counter before, he was kneeling at the little boy's side now, helping him up to at least his knees and giving him that kind look that *had*

to be practiced.

“Are you alright?” Dream asked, and the boy just cried with a hand on his head. “Did you hit your head?”

The boy’s parents came rushing to their son’s side, and George locked the claw machine that he’d run into carefully. When he turned back around with the keys heavy in his hands, Dream was inspecting the spot on the boy’s forehead that had been hit the worst.

George could barely see it, but he could see the way the poor boy’s skin glowed red. And he could see what looked like rug burn where it stained his elbows and forearms, rough and pink-red with an unfavorable sting. Even just looking at it made George suck his breath in through gritted teeth, and he knew how much worse everything seemed to be when the world felt so much bigger than himself.

“Yikes, looks like you took quite the fall, huh?” Dream said with a sense of comfort in his tone, but there was a lilt there that was meant to make the boy feel better.

It seemed to be working. He was crying a lot less than he was before, nodding his head while he wiped his eyes instead of screaming out into the air. Dream was still looking at the spot on his forehead with knitted eyebrows, swiping a thumb over the spot with a feather-light touch that still made the boy wince.

“Do you want some ice for your head?” Dream asked.

As the boy nodded, his parents answered through the matching concern on their faces. “That would be great, thank you.”

Dream looked toward George, who was still standing by the claw machine with keys in his hand like a useless idiot. But he looked back at Dream when he felt the eyes on him, waited for the instruction even if he could’ve guessed what it was going to be.

“Do you know where the ice is?”

“Yeah,” George answered with a nod. “Do you want me to go get some?”

“If you would, please.”

So George rushed off to go get a bag of ice for the kid. And he left the keys on the counter before he turned down the hall, getting the ice he was sent away for and wincing at how cold it felt in the center of his palm. But he headed back toward the arcade tossing it between his two hands, finding that Dream had moved the kid and his parents away from the stream of people trying to play games in the arcade.

He was still crouched down in front of the boy, but by the time George was handing him the bag of ice, they were both wearing smiles on their lips.

“You’ve got Superman on your shirt,” Dream commented as he handed the ice to the kid, guiding his hand up to the right spot on his head. “I like Superman.”

“Me too!” the kid piped up, bouncing slightly on his toes. “I think he’s the coolest *ever!*”

Dream laughed, and George kept standing next to him because it would never stop being the most endearing thing in the world. Dream could insist that he wasn’t any better with kids than an average person, but George would insist that he was wrong until he believed it.

Which he probably wouldn't ever believe it, so George would be forced to keep insisting.

"You're kinda like Superman, mister!" the boy said suddenly, and Dream laughed with a hand rubbing at the back of his neck.

He'd turned all shy and sheepish. It was pathetically endearing.

"I don't know about *that*," Dream insisted, cheeks turning pink under the spread of freckles on his skin.

But the boy wouldn't have it. "No, you're just like Superman! You saved me!"

It seemed that George wouldn't have to do all the insisting on his own. Maybe if enough little kids called Dream Superman, then he'd believe that he was a little bit better than average when it came to things like this.

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George realized something about himself. It was when he was at work, leaning over the counter watching Dream hand a stuffed unicorn he'd won out of the claw machine to an excited little girl that he realized it.

He was in love with Dream.

In hindsight, George couldn't believe it had taken him so long to realize it. In hindsight, fond looks and sparkling eyes and the way he found everything about the blond to be the greatest thing in the world—they were all loud, neon signs that he almost couldn't believe he'd been blind to. The *almost* was only there because George was still an idiot, and he'd always been a little terrible about realizing when he'd fallen in love with someone.

But that's what it was. He was in love with Dream, and his stupid coworker made him happier than anything else in the world, and he could watch that idiot hand free toys to kids all day and night. He could watch him play with a fidget spinner for hours on end just because it was *him*, could watch him stock claw machines and fix broken games and help little kids up off the ground.

He could fight with him over "defected" candy until they both got fired, could make faces at him on the security camera monitor until their manager asked what the hell they were doing with their time. He could ask him stupid questions until his voice got scratchy and spent, could listen to him talk about nothing and everything and all the things in between even if he wasn't getting paid minimum wage to sit right next to him.

He was in love with Dream. George was in love with Dream, with *him*, with the pretty blond boy who was walking back up to the counter right then at that very moment. He was wearing the lopsided smile that he always was, looping around the counter to stand next to George and look out over the arcade floor like there was something interesting waiting for them somewhere in all the flashing colors.

"Made that kid happy," George said without thought, a familiar parallel to something Dream had said before.

Dream laughed, and George knew that they were both looking in the same place. It felt the same as eye contact, even if they'd never turned their heads to meet gazes for real.

"It did," he agreed. "Making kids happy is easy, you know. You just give them things."

George laughed because Dream was right. Though it only worked if you gave them the *right* thing,

like a toy or candy or a sticker with their favorite character on it. It was almost too easy to bring those endearing smiles to their faces, and George wishes that life could still be that easy sometimes.

Not right now, though. Because love is complicated, and damn it, he's in love.

"I don't think I handle kids as well as you do, though," George insisted, and Dream was rolling his eyes because they'd had this conversation before. "I've never seen someone make a kid smile as big as you do when you say all the right things to them."

"Okay," Dream cut him off while he was still ahead, "you don't need to compliment me again. My ego is inflated enough as it is."

George laughed, knocking his shoulder against Dream's without thought. "I think you're humble."

Dream scoffed. "I think I need to *be* humbled."

"Learn how to take a compliment," George huffed, and Dream laughed like it was the funniest thing in the world.

The rest of their shift went something like that; making jokes at each other in between doing real work, arguing over who was going to stock what and which one of them should go to the back room. They argued like an old married couple—Sapnap had told them that when the three of them were all working the same shift—and even if George hadn't quite seen it then, he definitely saw it now.

He wondered if Dream did, too. He still remembered the way he'd laughed and turned red and tried to brush Sapnap's words off way back then, and he wondered if he'd do the same thing now.

So when their shift did finally come to a close, George felt a little bit sad. He'd have to say goodbye to the boy he was in love with, have to go home and lay in bed with nothing but his own thoughts to keep him company. Even if he'd seen hours and hours of Dream so far that summer, he decided that he could never get enough.

Which is why, when Dream asked George if he wanted to accompany him out to his car that day, he agreed without hesitation. And he followed Dream out the back door and to where his stupid silver car was parked in the corner of the lot, letting Dream turn to face him with a farewell bitter and on his lips.

"Well, George," Dream started, laughing where his nervous-sounding words curled to a close. "I can't believe this is the first time you've seen my car."

It was a joke, and it was trivial, but George couldn't believe it, either. So he laughed, too, glanced over Dream's shoulder to get a better look at his car where it sat behind him.

"Me neither," he admitted, and he wondered when the air between them had gotten so *tense*.

They stood in silence for a moment, sharing the strangely tense air between them when neither of them wanted to say goodbye. George wondered which one of them was finally going to bite it first, who was going to give in before the other one did, and he didn't want to be the one who relented.

But when he got sick of staring at the asphalt under his sneakers, he finally opened his mouth to speak. He told himself that he was only going to say "*goodbye*," or maybe "*see you later*" if he was feeling honest or optimistic, but that was not at all what he ended up saying.

“They tell you not to fall in love with your coworkers,” is what he blurted instead, immediately cringing at the idiocy of his words.

And all he got from Dream was a curious “*huh?*” and the pink tint to his cheeks that George found with the lift of his head. He knew that his face couldn’t be faring much better, feeling the heat under his cheeks where he was both embarrassed and flustered.

“I said,” he took a deep breath, “they tell you not to fall in love with your coworkers.”

Dream raised an eyebrow. “Did you fall in love with your coworker?” And it sounded like he didn’t want to believe it.

“Maybe,” George admitted with a shrug. “But it felt... inevitable, I guess.” He took another deep breath, wondering if it was better to keep his lungs full or empty or somewhere in the middle. “In hindsight, it felt inevitable.”

“Inevitable?” Dream prodded, and George pretended he didn’t notice the way he’d stepped closer. “What does that mean?”

“Well,” George stepped closer, too, “I think I would’ve fallen in love with you in every universe, Dream.”

And when he stood this close to him, George could see the way those green eyes lit up brighter than arcade lights. Brighter than the sun, brighter than every kid he’d ever been the sweetest person in the world to and handed their favorite candy.

“Yeah,” Dream whispered against George’s lips. “I think I would’ve fallen in love with you in every universe too, George.”

With a grin that couldn’t hide all his honest excitement, George managed to ask, “Even if I was a worm?”

Dream laughed, and that melodic sound was even better when it spilled so close to George’s lips.

“Yes, George,” he answered with sparkling lilt. “Even if you were a worm.”

So George took the final step forward, closed the gap between them under the afternoon sun, and he tasted the color pink off Dream’s grinning lips. Like summer, like bright colors, like the best days in the whole world until the very end of it all.

George could feel the world turn right in the space where their lips met. And they kissed each other stupid in the back parking lot, acting like they weren’t in broad daylight on a Wednesday afternoon without enough space between them and the door they’d come through after work.

Dream was sweet and intoxicating. Like the candy they fought each other over and hid in their pockets like their manager wouldn’t find out anyways, like chocolate kisses that turned out to be real kisses in the press of their sugar-pink lips.

They would’ve fallen in love in every universe. Even one where they met in a different arcade as kids with the same t-shirt on.

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